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HERO AND LEANDER

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HERO & LEANDER

TRANSLATED FROM THE GREEK
OF MUSAEUS

BY

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HERO AND LEANDER

NOTHING is known of the author of *Hero and Leander*, except that he was a "grammarian" or schoolmaster, named Musaeus. He probably lived at Alexandria, in the middle of the fifth century A.D. In the uncritical age of the Renaissance, he was naturally confused with his famous namesake—the legendary Musaeus whom the Greeks believed to be older than Homer; and so a romance, well called the dying swan-note of Greek poetry, was antedated by at least twelve centuries. There was this much excuse for the error, that the poem is a close imitation of Homeric metre, diction and tone. But it is Homer with a difference. Apart from changes in the language and structure of the hexameter—for example, the influence of the stress-accent is beginning to be felt—a new spirit has crept into Greek literature. The naïve simplicity of the old Epic has been lost. Between Homer and Musaeus, Sappho and Euripides and Apollonius have lived; and, coming after Phaedra and Medea, Hero must needs

be more self-conscious, more "modern," than Nausicaa. But this is not all. When *Hero and Leander* was written, Apollonius and Theocritus—whose age we are accustomed to call the evening of Greek poetry—were already ancient classics, as remote from Musaeus as Chaucer from Keats or Morris. A fresh form of Greek literature—the romantic novel—had risen with a new emphasis on the psychology of love, and the "parallel passages," collected by German industry, show how deeply the erotic writers—Heliodorus, Longus and the rest—had sunk into the mind of Musaeus. In actual poetry, again, there had just been a striking, if not very happy development in the new epic of Nonnus, an Egyptian Greek who, with painstaking impartiality, versified the Gospel of St John, after relating the myths of Dionysus in forty-eight books. To this latter poem, perhaps, Musaeus owes most of all; but he has paid his debt with interest, for, while few readers have begun and still fewer have finished the *Dionysiaca*, the *Hero and Leander* belongs to that class of poetry which is "not only admired but read."

The story is not found in early Greek literature, and cannot well be older than Alexandrine times. German scholars have suggested an "aetiological" origin, in two towers that faced each other across

the Dardanelles. This theory does not explain how the towers fell in love, or how one crossed the water to visit the other ; and it seems more helpful to account for the so-called " myth " of Hero and Leander by human nature rather than by aetiology. I agree with those who regard the poem as based on fact ; there is no difficulty in supposing a real Leander, who anticipated Byron in the Hellenistic age.

The distance of his swim—from one harbour to the other—was about three miles and a half, although Strabo says that the actual width of the straits near Abydos is less than a mile. Both Sestos and Abydos have been completely destroyed, but the site of the former was at or near Jallova, half-way between Crithia and Gallipoli, while the latter must have been at Nagara Point. Byron, describing his own swim, remarks that " the whole distance from the place whence we started to our landing on the other side, including the length we were carried by the current, was computed by those on board the frigate at upwards of four English miles, though the actual breadth is barely one."

The story—whatever its origin or date—was popular in the later Greek and Roman periods. Virgil is the first extant authority, in a fine passage

of the *Georgics* (iii. 258) ; and Ovid found the theme to his taste, and in a pair of poetic letters (*Heroides*, 18, 19) did justice to the pathos of the two lovers parted by the stormy Dardanelles. One of his lines—

"idem navigium, navita, vector ero"—

is so remarkable a coincidence with the curious conceit of Musaeus—

αὐτὸς ἔων ἐρέτης, αὐτόστολος, αὐτόματος ἡμυ—

that both Ovid and Musaeus have been thought to borrow from some lost Alexandrine original. But the Greek poet, as a schoolmaster, may well have known and followed Ovid, with whom indeed he has much in common.

Musaeus himself may not have been a great poet, but he could at least inspire a greater than he. Had Marlowe "translated" *Hero and Leander*, the present version would have been a needless impertinence. But Marlowe, while he began with a free rendering of the Greek, soon forgot his original and went his own magnificent way.¹ His famous line—

"Who ever loved that loved not at first sight?"—

¹ Only the first two "Sestiads" were by Marlowe, Chapman (who also translated Musaeus) wrote the rest.

has no equivalent in Musaeus, although one might think that the Greek poet would have welcomed it as the text of his tale. But, as a matter of fact, Musaeus would have thought it a mere commonplace. The Alexandrines had already exploited the theme of love at first sight. Medea, in Apollonius, Simaetha, in Theocritus, had both been sudden victims. Greek ladies, in their Oriental seclusion, had little opportunity for a slow courtship. Even in the age and city of Hypatia, their retired life, before a marriage of convenience, was mainly broken by some religious procession or festival, where, as Ovid says, ladies could see the spectacle and be seen. Musaeus looks elsewhere for his text, and finds it more tragically: there are two powers that work their will in human life—Love and Fate. When they work in harmony, life is straightforward, perfect; but they often clash; and then, though Love is strong, Fate is stronger—

Ἔρως δ' οἶκ' ἤρκεσε Μοῖρας.

So, at least, it would seem to the ordinary Greek, with his unquestioned belief in the overlordship of Fate. But the poet sees deeper. The victory is but a defeat disguised. There is a tragedy, but as in all true tragedies, nothing is here for tears.

Even among the ruins of their lives, the love of Hero and Leander is triumphant :

“In death itself they had joy of one another.”

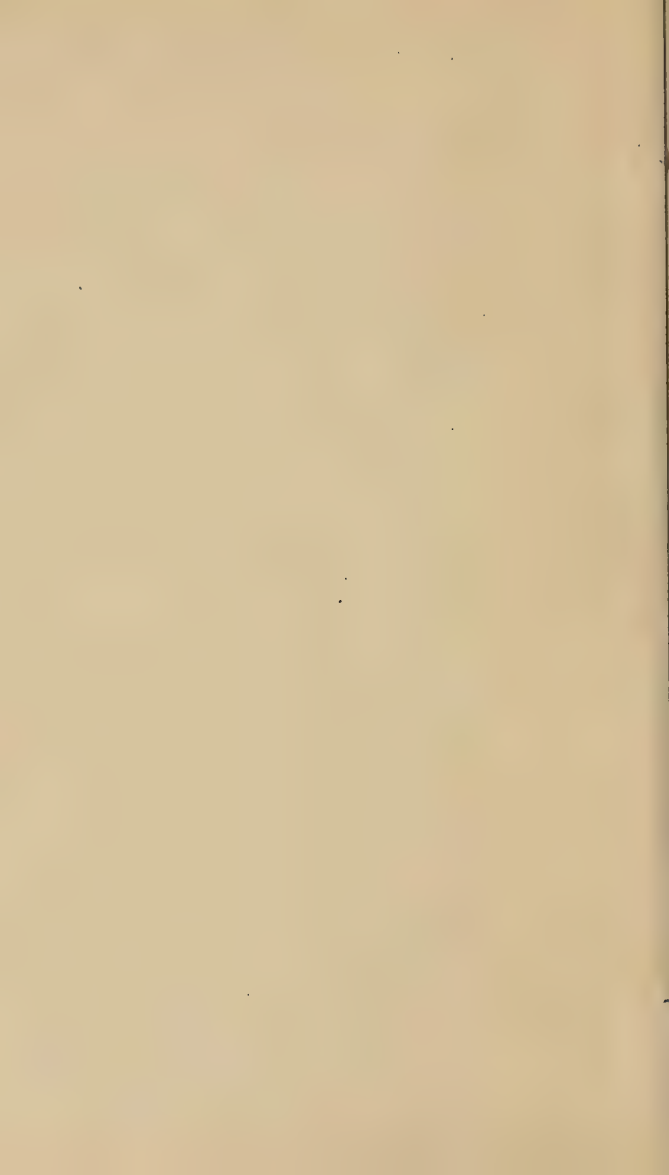
The poem suggests an inevitable comparison with its counterpart—the *Pervigilium Veneris*—in which Latin poetry may be said to close. There are differences, of course, in subject, in style, in metre ; but both are informed with something of the same spirit—the spirit that mourns the death of Love and Spring, and can yet feel and communicate the beauty of sorrow. As Leander and Hero are

“Two stars equal to each other,”

these two poems are a splendid pair ; and, with them, the lamps handed on by Homer and Virgil, long flickering and exhausted, seemed suddenly to have burst into a last brilliant flame, just before their lights were finally quenched, like Hero's lamp, by the winds of barbarism.

The following translation is based, though not slavishly, on the text of Ludwich (Musaïos, *Hero and Leander*, Bonn, 1912). It is as literal as the difference between Greek and English modes of poetic expression will permit. I have not attempted to render the very rhetorical introduction of fifteen lines, in which the poet invokes the Muse, and

apostrophizes the lamp, that Zeus should have added to the stars. This preface is so frigid that one may believe Musaeus to have written it as a grammarian rather than poet. Its only value is to lay stress on the part played by the lamp in the tragic story: like Meleager's torch, it is the tere-ment of the soul, and on its safety the life of Leander depends. But Musaeus is no folklorist, to understand the nature of this mystic union. He would have preferred to be judged by his poetry, and I can only hope that something of his poetic gift may be dimly seen in this translation.



HERO AND LEANDER

NEIGHBOURS that faced across the narrow-
ing seas,
Lay Sestos and Abydos, and on these
Love bent his bow ; a single arrow flamed,
Piercing two mortals : one, Leander named,
A youth who gave Abydos her renown,
One, Hero, a fair girl of Sestos-town,—
Twin-stars of those two cities ; and either shone
As splendid as its bright companion.
Still may the traveller see the high tower stand,
Where once the lamp in Sestian Hero's hand
Pointed her lover's path ; and still there ring,
From old Abydan walls re-echoing,
The voices of the melancholy tide,
That tell how young Leander loved and died.

How came the Abydan youth to long for her
Who lived apart in Sestos, and to stir
An answering passion ? Hero, of noble blood,
Served Aphrodite, in pure maidenhood,
A lovely priestess, where her ancestry
Had built a tower that overtopped the sea.

And there, a second Cytherean queen,
She dwelt, with shamefastness and modest mien,
Never consorting with the girlish throng,
Nor ever dancing, other maids among,
Lest the fine flower of beauty should be soiled
In spiteful hands. By jealousy undespoiled,
She worshipped Cytherea, and adored
Eros, the archer, and often heavenward
Offered atoning gifts ; but even so,
She learned the anguish of his fiery bow.

For now was due the holy Cyprian feast,
Wherein the Sestian folk, greatest and least,
Honour Adonis and queen Aphrodite ; all
Gathered, astir to keep high festival,
From every island sea-engarlanded,
From plains Thessalian, and the rocky head
Of Cyprus ; none remained of womankind
In all Cythera ; nor was left behind
On Lebanon, in any odorous glen,
A worshipper ; no one of neighbouring men
Lagged, whether Phrygian or Abydan gates
Poured out their citizens to cross the straits.
And many a gallant came—love-smitten youth
Cares little for the sacrifice, in truth,
But much for the maidens sacrificing there.
Now up the temple-aisle went Hero fair,
And from her perfect face a radiancy

Shone, as the clear moon in a cloudless sky.
The snow upon her cheek was blent with red,
Like tinges of the blush-rose ; you had said
“ Her body is a garden of red roses
Breaking in blossom, for her robe discloses
Each limb a flower, till, when she walks, there meet
The white hem and the roses of her feet.”
There are three Graces only, say the wise ?
Nay, but in either of Hero’s lucent eyes
A hundred laughter-loving Graces proved
The servant worth her mistress. So she moved
Fairer than woman, and herself appeared
The avatar of the deity she revered.
And the hearts of men were fluttered, and beat fast
With ecstasy ; for as her light feet passed
Over the marble pavement, in her train
All eyes and minds and eager souls were fain
To follow ; and one cried, marvelling, “ I have
known
The city that is famed as Helen’s own,
Where maiden vies with maiden in beauty rare,
But I saw none at Sparta who might dare
Accept the challenge of that flawless face.
Surely a youthful goddess—a new Grace—
Ministers to Aphrodite. I have gazed
Till vision is weary, and am still amazed.
Let me but win her, and then quickly die !—

I grudge no god his immortality
Should I make Hero mine. And if I pray
An impious prayer, O Goddess, filching away
Thine own, give me her equal ! ” Thus he cried,
But most were silent, spell-bound and tongue-
tied.

Not so Leander : passionately, he brooked
No tame concealment of his love. He looked,
And life, without her, seemed a thing of nought :
Such burning fire shot from her eyes, and caught
His heart defenceless. Beauty’s arrows fly
Swifter than any archer’s : eye strikes eye
And penetrates by this pathway to the goal,
Where waits the prize of an enraptured soul.
Even so by turns he wonders, blushes, trembles,
And plucks up courage, blushing, as he dissembles
The hope his stammering tongue dares not unfold ;
Then Passion checks the blush, and Love grows
bold,

Bidding the youth come near and greet the maid
With tender looks, more eloquent to persuade
Than spoken words. And she, his guile per-
ceiving,

Rejoiced in silence, but her bosom’s heaving
Sent him the message of her soft-drawn sighs,
As she would glance, and turn away her eyes,
And glance again. Thus joyfully he learned

That his love-signs were read, his love not
spurned.

But while he sought for secrecy, to gain
His full desire, daylight began to wane
Westward, and in the east horizon dim
The evening star silvered the heaven's rim.
Then, as the train of Night was sweeping near,
Leander, venturous with abated fear,
Came, and just touched her rosy finger-tips,
And looked, with no word uttered ; and Hero's
lips

Were silent, and the fingers that he had seized
She quickly drew away, as if displeased.
But he, observing marks of willingness
Beneath the anger, caught her fair-wrought dress,
To lead her toward the temple's deepest shade,
And Hero followed, faltering and afraid,
With such reproaches as are woman's use ;
“ Others—not I—may do thy pleasure : loose
My dress from thy rough lust-emboldened clutch.
Respect my parents' anger ; nay, to touch
Aphrodite's priestess is an evil thing,
And virgins may not yield to wantoning.”

Her words were wrathful, but a gentler mood
Was heralded, and the lover understood
Love's hidden augury, and he kissed the maid
Upon her white and fragrant neck, and said :

“ O mirror of the Cyprian queen divine,
Athena’s other self, who dost outshine
All shining excellence of mortal birth,
Daughter of Jove, a visitor upon earth !
Happy thy father, happy she who bare,
In thee, a wonder ! Hearken to my prayer,
Pity my plight, show thyself in true deed
The votary of thy Goddess. Thou shouldst heed
Her ordinance, and the mysteries—darkly sealed
To maidenhood—wherein she stands revealed,
Commanding an initiate minister
To love. Therefore, if thou dost worship her,
Bear the delightful yoke she lays on thee,
And follow her sweet laws. Receive from me
My vows, and—if thou wilt—my love, and take
The booty Eros captured for thy sake.
Thou knowest how Hermes of the Golden Rod
Brought the strong Hercules beneath the nod
And lightest whim of Lydian Omphale.
Me Cytherea brings more urgently
Than Hermes. And by another be forewarned
—Arcadian Atalanta—when she scorned
Meilanion, her suitor, prizing more
Her maidenhood. But Aphrodite, sore
At slighted honour, sent infatuate
Desire upon disdain. Of such a fate,
Dearest, beware ; stern is the punishment.”

So with soft passion-luring words he bent
The will that struggled with her heart. But
shame

Covered her ; with eyes downcast and cheeks
afame

And face that feared to encounter him, she beat
The floor with tappings of her nervous feet,
And drew her cloak closelier to her side,
And still was silent—tokens that betide
The nearness of love's self-abandoning.

For now she felt the sweet-and-bitter sting
Fixt by the goad that Aphrodite plies,
And loved Leander, though her modest eyes
Looked down, and shunned his countenance set
fast

On the bright vision of her neck. At last,
With changeful flushes, and virginal cheeks aglow
In crimson-eddyng flood, she murmured low :

“ Sir, such fine talk as this would surely turn
A stone to weeping ! How camest thou to learn
Subtlety, and clever phrase of argument ?
Ah me ! who brought thee hither, vainly sent ?
How dost thou hope, a wanderer unknown,
Untestified, to have me for thine own ?
By ceremony, and the sacred marriage-tie ?
My kinsfolk would forbid it. Or wilt thou try,
As a pretended stranger, travel-worn,

To linger here, seeking the pleasure born
In stolen love? Not so may I be won.
Tongues wag; a secret thing in darkness done
Is soon the gossip of the market-place.
And yet . . . I would be told thy name and race:
My name—thou knowest—is Hero, and I dwell
Where a tall tower, before the citadel
Of Sestos, hangs upon the sounding sea.
There, with one maiden, for all my company,
Harsh parents keep me, sorrowing for dearth
Of fellowship, and the joy of friendly mirth
And song; but to my ears cometh alone
The windy water's never-ceasing moan."

She ended, and would gladly have unsaid
The words for very shame, and veiled her head
Beneath her cloak. But his turbulent passion
drove

Leander towards the hoped-for meed of love.
For guileful Eros, once having pierced his prey,
Himself will heal the wound, and show the way
Whereby his slaves learn wisdom from distress.
So now he taught his victim craftiness,
Prompting a plan—but, all too late for rueing,
Leander's wisdom turned to his undoing.
"Lady," he said, "for such a sweet reward,
I'd brave the ocean, though it beat and roared
And foamed with fire. Nightly, to thy dear bed,

A lover sea-drenched and wave-buffed,
I'll swim the Hellespont, from where my home
Lies in Abydos—no long way to come.
One thing I ask—that on the other side
Thy tower shall hold a lamp, my beacon-guide ;
So shall I be love's ship, and sail aright,
Shaping my dark course by that starry light.
I shall not watch the slow Arcturus set,
Nor mark Orion's piloting, nor yet
The Wain that never sinks ; for my own star
Will lead me safe across Love's harbour-bar.
Only take care, lest some wind's violent breath
Put out the light, and drag me to my death ;
For know, that in the constancy of that flame
I live. And now,—if thou wouldst learn my
name—

Thy husband is Leander."

Thus their troth
Was plighted, and a covenant made for both,
For her, to hold the shining lamp, for him,
Over the flame-lit waterpath to swim.
So with their love declared, their trysting sped,
But with desire still to be perfected,
They went their ways—she, back to the tower ;
but he
Noted the landmarks round him carefully,
Lest his night-wandering feet might lose the road,

And then sailed homeward to his own abode
In great Abydos. Wistfully they went,
Longing for their love's full accomplishment,
When, much entreated, tardy night should rise.
At length a robe of darkness wrapped the skies,
And all men, save Leander, turned to sleep ;
But he stood wakefully by the unquiet deep,
Impatient, till the fatal lamp should bring
His marriage-hour with happy summoning.
And Hero, when the last sunbeam had dwindled,
Lighted the lamp, and straightway love was
kindled

Within Leander's heart. He, on solid ground,
Heard the wild thunder-throated waves resound,
And shrank from plunging. But new hopes were
near,

To feed his soul with comfort : " Love I fear,
And fearful is the Ocean ; yet the waves
Are only water ; and in my heart there raves
A burning flame. Heed thou the deadlier fire,
My heart ! nor let the sea foil thy desire.
What harm can water work thee, being the home
Of Aphrodite, born from the sea-foam ?
Hers is the Ocean, hers my agony."
So saying, he threw off him speedily
His tunic, and rolled it close about his hair,
Then leapt into the sea—his only care

To reach the lamp—voyaging in strange guise,
Himself the ship, mariner, and merchandise.

But in the high tower Hero, at her task
Of safeguarding the lamp, would often mask
Its flame from the wind-quarter, and with her
dress

Would screen it against a sudden gustiness,
Until Leander fought his perilous way
To the calm anchorage in the Sestian bay.
And thence she brought him breathless to her
door,

Still flecked with spray of frothy water hoar,
And with a mute embrace led her bridegroom
To the dear welcome of her maiden-room.
Therein, she bathed his body, and sprinkled him
With oil rose-scented on each quivering limb,
That washed away the pungent-savoured brine,
And leaned across the bed, to intertwine
Her arms with his, speaking soft words of love :
“ Husband, my husband ! Thou has laboured
above

All others who have toiled to earn their brides ;
Thou hast had full surfeit of the salty tides
And rankness of the monster-peopled seas.
Now let my arms bring to thy labour ease.”

So Hero spoke, and suffered him to untie
Her girdle, and they essayed the mystery

Of Aphrodite's grace, in wedlock true,
Though without marriage-hymn or dances due,
Or music round the bridal bed, or prayer
That the Queen of Gods might smile upon the
pair.

No torches lit the room, no nimble feet
Of maidens whirled in the swift dance, to greet
Their homecoming. Father or mother none
Sang songs to Hymen ; by the bed alone
Silence was bridesmaid, and the priestess Night,
Dark celebrant, performed the holy rite.
Nor dared the bridegroom linger till the morn ;
In haste, with broken joys, untimely torn
From Hero, and still fragrant with the breath
Clinging to those whom Cypris favoureth,
He rose, and swam to his own countrymen.
But Hero stayed, escaping her parents' ken,
A wedded wife by night, a maid by day ;
And many prayers these two were wont to pray
That the high sun might quicken to the west.

So for a little while, safe and unguessed,
The secret prospered, and the Cyprian spell,
With its sweet working ineluctable,
Gave their far-sundered loves a happy boon
In darkness. But wild winter came, full soon,
When by strong blasts, tumultuously driven,
The sea's foundations were upheaved and riven,

And the huddled waves fled from the tempest-whips,

And sailors trembled, drawing their painted ships
High on the thirsty sands above the wrack.

But no mad sea, Leander, could bend back

Thy stubborn purpose, when from Hero's tower

The bright lamp beckoning at the appointed hour

Flashed out its faithless, merciless command.

Ah ! had she been content, and stayed her hand,

Nor kindled that brief star, too quickly cooled !

But tyrant Fate and Passion overruled,

And the witch'd lamp, promising Love's delight,

Brought only death.

In that dark watch of night,

When winds are fiercest, flinging at the sea

The deadliest javelins of their armoury,

Leander, all-impetuous for his bride,

Started to breast the swollen surf, and ride

The storm-foot horse of the unmastered main,

That carried him helpless, a rider without rein.

Wave curled on wave ; the sea and heavenly vault

Were mixed, and all the winds in savage assault

Shrieked as they fought—the West wind with the

East,

South with the terrible North ; nor ever ceased

The thunder of the unforgiving surge.

And pitifully Leander called, to urge

The aid of Her, who rose from the sea-spray
—Pitifully cried to Him, whom seas obey,
The lord Poseidon. Often would he entreat
Boreas, not to forget those kisses sweet
Of Attic Oreithyia ; but all failed :
Love had confronted Fate, and Fate prevailed.
On every side a barrier of waves stood
Unscalable, and then broke in a great flood,
That swept him hither and thither, till at length
His feet grew impotent, and all the strength
In his unresting arms was spent in vain,
And the waves gripped his throat, that he should
 drain

A bitter draught. And then a violent gust
Blew out the lamp, unequal to its trust,
And, with the flame, Leander's love and life.

 Meanwhile, with dull foreboding thought, his
 wife

Watched, leaden-eyed, in sleepless vigilance,
Till the day came—but on the wide expanse
Came no sight of Leander, though her gaze,
This way and that, ranged the long water-ways
—If the swimmer might have missed the landing-
 place,
The lamp being lost.

 And there, at the tower's base,
Beneath her on the rocks, she saw him bleeding,

And beaten into a mangled thing unheeding.
Frenzied, she rushed, and with her garments rent,
Leapt desperately from the high battlement
To draw her last breath at her husband's side.

So Love, in Death itself, was satisfied.

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